



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Rabies

(hydrophobia)

What is rabies?

Rabies is a very serious disease caused by a virus that affects mammals, including humans. The majority of rabies cases occur in wild animals; on the US mainland, animals most often infected with rabies include skunks, foxes, raccoons and bats. Unless rabies infection is treated right away, death can result. Most deaths from rabies occur in developing countries where prompt medical attention and rabies vaccines (shots) are not readily available. Hawaii is the only state in the United States that is free of rabies.

How do you get it?

Rabies is usually spread to humans through the bites of rabid (rabies-diseased) animals. You can also get rabies when saliva from a rabid animal gets directly into the eyes, nose, mouth, or a wound.

What are the symptoms of rabies?

The early symptoms of rabies include malaise, alternating periods of irritability (bad temper) and anxiety (nervousness), headache, fever, and sometimes, itching or pain at the site of the bite. Rabies can lead to numbness or paralysis, spasms of the throat muscles, seizures, mental confusion, coma, and death.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms usually start 2 to 8 weeks after exposure to a rabid animal. Rarely, it can take as few as 5 days or more than a year for symptoms to appear.

What is the treatment for rabies?

There is no treatment for rabies after symptoms start, and the disease is almost always fatal. However, doctors can prescribe medicines (called postexposure prophylaxis, or PEP) to be given after exposure and before symptoms begin that may keep the disease from developing. After an animal bite, immediately and carefully wash the entire site of the bite or wound with lots of soap and water. See a doctor right away to decide whether PEP is needed.

What happens if you are exposed to rabies and don't get treated?

If left untreated, rabies is almost always fatal, but exposure to a rabid animal does not always result in the disease. When rabies is suspected, getting immediate PEP can be effective in preventing disease.

How can you keep from getting rabies?

Avoid all wild animals, especially those acting strangely.

People at risk of exposure to rabies, such as veterinarians, animal handlers, laboratory workers, and spelunkers should get rabies vaccine.

In areas where rabies is found, vaccinate pets to protect them from getting rabies.

For more information, see the CDC's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/>